

RESOURCE GUIDE



# Offer *versus* Serve

in the  
School  
Nutrition  
Programs







# I. Background and General Provisions

## What is Offer versus Serve?

Offer versus Serve or OVS is a concept that applies to menu planning and to the determination of reimbursable school meals. OVS allows students to decline some of the food offered in a school lunch or school breakfast and is applicable to all menu planning approaches (Traditional Food-based Menu Planning; Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning; Nutrient Standard Menu Planning; and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning).

### Goals of OVS

- To reduce food waste in the school meals programs
- To permit students choices to select the foods they prefer

## What is the background of OVS?

Congress first adopted OVS in 1975 for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Initially, OVS only applied to senior high school students. OVS was so successful and well received that Congress authorized use of OVS for middle/junior high schools in 1977 and for elementary schools in 1981. The statutory provision for OVS is found in Section 9(a)(3) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. OVS was extended to the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1985 in Section 4(e)(2) of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. The regulations on OVS for the NSLP are found at 7 CFR 210.10 and for the SBP at 7 CFR 220.8.

## What are the common provisions for OVS?

While the specific application of OVS depends on the menu planning approach, there are some provisions for OVS that apply to all menu planning approaches.

### ► Implementation:

- For the NSLP, the school food authority **must** implement OVS at senior high schools (as defined by the State educational agency).
- For the NSLP, the school food authority has the discretion to implement OVS at middle and/or elementary schools (as defined by the State educational agency).
- For the SBP, the school food authority has the discretion to implement OVS at any or all grade levels.

## ► Unit pricing:

- School meals must be priced (for the paid or reduced price categories) as a unit. This means that one price is established for a complete reimbursable meal in the paid meal category and one price is established for a complete reimbursable meal in the reduced price meal category.
- OVS does not affect the unit price of the meal established by the school food authority.
- Regardless of the number of items students select, they must pay the established unit price for a reimbursable meal.

### Overview of OVS Implementation

Type of School	Definition	OVS for the NSLP	OVS for the SBP
Senior High	As defined by the State educational agency	Mandatory	Optional <sup>1</sup>
Middle or Elementary		Optional <sup>1,2</sup>	Optional <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The school food authority decides whether to implement OVS.

<sup>2</sup> For the food-based menu planning approaches for the NSLP, the school food authority may allow students in middle or elementary school to decline either one or two food items.

Note: Please refer to the Appendix and Glossary for explanations of the terms used in this guidance.

## What does this manual replace?

This manual replaces the FNS-265, Meal Pattern Requirements and Offer Versus Serve Manual. The information in that publication on the meal pattern requirements can be found in FNS-303, A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals. FNS-265 also included training material that is now provided separately.

## Where is specific crediting information for food-based menu planning located?

Specific information on each food component is found in:

- Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs (revised November, 2001) PA-1331;
- FNS Instruction 783-1, Revision 2, The Grains/Breads Requirement for the Food-Based Menu Planning Alternatives in the Child Nutrition Programs;
- FNS Instruction 783-7, Revision 1, Milk Requirement—Child Nutrition Programs;

- FNS Instruction 783-11, Revision 1, Juice Products—Child Nutrition Programs;
- Appendix A to 7 CFR 210 concerning enriched macaroni products with fortified protein and alternate protein products used in the NSLP; and
- Appendix A to 7 CFR 220 formulated grain-fruit products and alternate protein products used in the SBP.

## General Questions and Answers

### 1. Can the State agency prohibit the use of OVS at the senior high level?

No. The State agency cannot prohibit use of OVS in the NSLP at the senior high level. School food authorities **must** implement OVS at senior high levels.

### 2. Below the senior high level for the NSLP and for the SBP, who determines if OVS is implemented?

The decision to use OVS for the SBP or for grades below the senior high school level in the NSLP is a school food authority decision. The school food authority may make this decision on a school-by-school basis or may only implement OVS on some days. (The school food authority should consider the practicality of such decisions.) Except at the senior high level, the State agency cannot require implementation of OVS for either the SBP or for the NSLP.

### 3. Does OVS apply to the snack service of the NSLP?

No, there is no OVS in the snack service because only two components are required.

### 4. How does unit pricing apply, for example, to the food-based menu planning approaches?

Under the food-based menu planning approaches for the NSLP, a student who takes 3, 4, or 5 food items, or smaller portions of some items, pays the same price.

### 5. Are schools with pre-plated systems required to convert to another system to accommodate OVS?

No, even senior high schools are not required to change their serving system to accommodate OVS. However, the SFA may wish to contact their State agency to discuss ways (such as individually packaging each food item) to implement OVS.

**6. Are food bars/salad bars/garden bars permitted with OVS?**

Yes, food bars are permitted with OVS. To allow the students and cashiers to identify reimbursable meals from food bars, the menu planner must clearly identify the food items/menu items provided on the food bar and the minimum serving size for each item. Further, the menu planner must also indicate which foods and combinations of foods the students may choose to select a reimbursable meal under OVS.

**7. Can a school have both OVS and a la carte service?**

Yes. Both foods offered in reimbursable meals and other foods (except foods of minimal nutritional value as defined in the NSLP and SBP regulations) may be offered a la carte. Students and cashiers need to know which foods are considered food items/menu items for the purposes of a reimbursable meal and OVS. Students and cashiers also need to be aware that if the required food items/menu items for a reimbursable meal under OVS are not selected, students will be charged a la carte prices for the items selected.

**8. A school allows a student to take an item that is not creditable under the food-based menu planning approaches or is not considered a menu item under the nutrient standard menu planning approaches. The school considers the item (chocolate pudding, for example) as a compliment to a reimbursable meal. How does this affect OVS?**

Any food item/menu item that is not part of the reimbursable meal is not counted toward the minimum number of items required under OVS. Students and food service staff need to know which foods are credited for the purposes of a reimbursable meal and OVS.

**9. A school food authority has developed an alternate approach to menu planning as allowed under 7 CFR 210.10(l) and 220.8(h). How should OVS be implemented?**

In general, the alternate menu planning approach follows the OVS procedures for food-based or nutrient standard menu planning. Please see 7 CFR 210.10(l)(4)(ii) and 7 CFR 220.8(h)(3)(ii) on OVS for alternate menu planning approaches and how OVS is to be implemented for alternate menu planning approaches.

## II. OVS for Traditional and Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning

---

### What are the basic requirements for the food-based menu planning approaches?

- Menus planned using the food-based menu planning approaches are based on meal patterns that specify four food components (meat/meat alternate, grains/breads, vegetables/fruits, and milk) in the specified minimum amounts for various age/grades of students.
- For lunches, 5 food **items** must be offered in the specified minimum amounts. These are: meat/meat alternate, grains/breads, 2 servings of vegetables/fruits, and milk.
- For breakfasts, 4 food **items** must be offered in the specified minimum amounts. These are:
  - 1 serving of juice/fruit/vegetable, and
  - 1 serving of milk, and
  - 2 servings of grains/breads OR
  - 2 servings of meat/meat alternate OR
  - 1 serving of meat/meat alternate and 1 serving of grains/breads OR
  - an equivalent combination of meat/meat alternate//grains/breads.
- An “equivalent combination” of the meat/meat alternate//grains/breads components for the SBP provides flexibility for menu planners. Using this concept, menu planners may plan dishes that **in total** are credited as meeting 1 or more of required servings of these components. For example, if the menu planner offers a breakfast pizza with 1¼ serving of grains/breads and ¾ serving of cheese, this combination food would be credited as 2 servings of these components
- In addition, meals planned using the food-based menu planning approaches must also meet the nutrition standards for school meals.
- Please refer to FNS-303, A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals for additional information.



## What are the general OVS requirements for lunches and breakfasts?

- The choice of which food items to select is strictly the student's decision. Schools cannot specify which food items a student must select. However, if the menu has a combination food such as pizza that contains, for example, 3 of the 5 required food items for the NSLP, the student must select the pizza if there are not enough additional items available to select a reimbursable lunch. (Also see question 1. for this section.)
- Students must take **full** servings of the food items selected to count toward a reimbursable meal. Students may take smaller portions of any food item; however, the smaller portions do not count towards a reimbursable meal.
- Students may decline any item, including the entrée or milk in a food-based menu planning approach.

## What are the specific OVS requirements for lunch?

- At all levels, students must be offered at least the minimum serving sizes of 5 food items from the 4 food components.
- At the senior high school level, the school food authority must permit students to decline up to 2 of the 5 food items offered.
- Below the senior high school level, the school food authority has the option to permit students to decline 1 or 2 of the 5 food items offered.
- Double servings of the same food item (such as 2 servings of milk or 2 servings of corn) may only be credited as 1 food item.
- Under the enhanced food-based menu planning approach only, schools may credit up to 1 grain-based dessert per day towards meeting the grains/breads component for students in kindergarten through grade 12.

## What are the specific OVS requirements for breakfast?

- Students must be offered at least the minimum serving sizes of 4 food items from 3 or 4 components.
- At all grade levels, OVS is optional.
- If implemented, each school may allow students to refuse one food item from any component.
- Double servings of the same grains/breads or meat/meat alternate food items can be credited towards a reimbursable breakfast.
- Double servings of other food components, such as vegetables/fruits, **cannot** be credited towards a reimbursable breakfast.
- Only 2 food items from the meat/meat alternate//grains/breads components may be counted towards a reimbursable breakfast.



## What are the OVS requirements by food component?

### Meat/meat alternate

- If the meat/meat alternate is provided in 2 items on a menu (such as soup and sandwich), a student must take the full servings of both foods to meet the required amount of meat/meat alternate to be credited as providing the full meat/meat alternate component.
- For the SBP, a full serving of the meat/meat alternate component is not required when combined with the grains/breads component. Schools may offer a **total** of 2 servings of meat/meat alternate//grains/breads. For example, if the school offers a muffin (1½ servings of grains/breads) with ½ ounce of cheese. This combination **totals** 2 servings of these components and is credited as providing 2 of the 4 required food items.

### Vegetables/Fruits

- To count 1 vegetables/fruits food item, a student must take the full serving size planned for that food item.
- Menu items that are mixtures, such as fruit cocktail or mixed vegetables, only count as 1 vegetables/fruits serving.
- For the NSLP, 2 or more servings of **different** vegetables and/or fruits (that total the minimum serving size) must be offered to meet the component requirement.
- For the NSLP, a student must take 2 or more food items that total the full amount required (i.e., ¾ cup for grades 4-12 in traditional food-based menu planning) in order to be credited as the full vegetables/fruits **component**.
- For the NSLP under the enhanced food-based menu planning approach only, the meal pattern for students in kindergarten through grade 6 has a weekly (an extra ½ cup over the school week) as well as a daily requirement (¾ cup for vegetables/fruits). In order for schools to meet the weekly requirement, the amount of vegetables/fruits offered on some days may exceed the daily requirement. Only the daily requirement for the vegetables/fruits component is credited for OVS. For example, the school offers 3 different servings of fruits and vegetables—¼ cup of peas, ½ cup of peaches and ½ cup of tossed salad for a total of 1¼ cup. A 5th grade student selects all 3 items. For the purposes of a reimbursable meal, the student is credited with the full vegetables/fruits component because the requirement for ¾ cup of 2 different vegetables/fruits is met. The selection of the tossed salad cannot be credited as an additional food item for a reimbursable lunch.

## Grains/Breads

- To count a grains/breads food item, a student must take a minimum of 1 full serving. A serving is a slice of bread or a comparable serving of another grains/breads item.
- The grains/breads food item may be taken in combination with another food item (for example, an entrée) or separately (such as a roll or serving of rice).
- For the NSLP, a grains/breads item may only be credited if the total selected adds up to 1 full grains/breads serving.
- For the NSLP under the enhanced food-based menu planning approach only, schools may credit up to 1 grain-based dessert per day towards the grains/breads component for kindergarten through grade 12.
- For the NSLP, there are both daily and weekly minimum requirements. In order for schools to meet the weekly requirement, more than one grains/breads item may be offered on some days. Only 1 of the grains/breads items counts towards OVS. For example, the school offers  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of pasta and a one-ounce roll. Either the pasta or the roll may count as meeting the grains/breads component but if the student selects both, only one grains/breads item is credited for a reimbursable lunch.
- For the SBP, a full serving of the grains/breads component is not required when combined with the meat/meat alternate component. Schools may offer a total of 2 servings of meat/meat alternate//grains/breads. For example, the school offers a breakfast burrito ( $\frac{3}{4}$  serving of grains/breads) filled with shredded cheese and sausage (totaling  $\frac{3}{4}$  ounce of meat/meat alternate). This combination **totals** 2 servings of these components and is credited as providing 2 of the 4 required food items.

## Milk

- For lunch, schools must offer fluid milk as a beverage.
- For breakfast, schools must offer fluid milk as a beverage, on cereal, or both.

## Questions and Answers for Part II., Traditional and Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning

- 1. If the school food service serves a menu item that is a combination of foods (such as beef stew) that cannot be separated, can the student be required to take that item?**

Yes. Combination foods that do not allow separation of food items may require that specific foods be selected in order to meet meal pattern requirements. Therefore, when students cannot select other items to make up a reimbursable meal, they must take a combination dish.

- 2. Under the traditional food-based menu planning approach, Group IV of the meal pattern requires that at least 2 servings of vegetables/fruits, totaling  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a cup be offered. A menu planner chooses to offer 3 servings ( $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of peaches,  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of peas and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of green beans) totaling  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a cup. If the student selects the peaches and the peas along with a carton of milk, is this a reimbursable meal under OVS since the student has taken two different sources of vegetables/fruits?**

No, it is not a reimbursable meal; the student must take the number of servings of vegetables/fruits which total the full amount required in the meal pattern for the component. In this example, to meet the requirement for the component and thus to count as 2 food items for OVS, the student must take all 3 servings.



**3. Consider this SBP menu for either of the food-based menu planning approaches for kindergarten through grade 12:**

Choice of full-strength orange juice, full-strength apple juice OR fruit cup;

Choice of: low fat chocolate milk, low fat unflavored milk OR nonfat unflavored milk;

Choice of two of the same or two different foods from the following:

Scrambled egg ( $\frac{1}{2}$  large egg)

1 slice of whole-wheat toast

1.8-ounce blueberry muffin

1.1-ounce waffle

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup of cold cereal

**Please indicate if the following trays selected by students are reimbursable:**

Tray	Reimbursable?
2 servings of scrambled egg (1 large egg) and apple juice	Yes, there are 3 food items because double servings of the meat/meat alternate component are counted under the SBP.
1 serving of scrambled egg ( $\frac{1}{2}$ large egg) and juice	No, only 2 food items selected. To be reimbursable, the student must select another serving of scrambled egg, a grain/bread item or milk.

**4. A school offers 1 large egg, scrambled, with 1 ounce of cheese on a biscuit (which provides 2 servings of grains/breads). If the student selects only this item, does s/he have a reimbursable breakfast?**

No. While the egg/cheese biscuit has 2 servings of meat/meat alternate and 2 servings of grains/breads, a maximum of 2 food items from these components may be counted towards a reimbursable breakfast. The student must also select a milk or vegetables/fruits item to have a reimbursable breakfast.

### **III. OVS in Nutrient Standard Menu Planning and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning**

---

#### **What are the basic requirements for the nutrient-based menu planning approaches?**

- The nutrient-standard menu planning approaches require the menu planner to use USDA-approved nutrient analysis software to develop menus that offer the required levels of nutrients for reimbursable meals. At least 3 menu items must be offered each day and when averaged over a school week, must meet the age/grade appropriate nutrient standards.
- For lunches, a minimum of 3 menu items is required (an entrée, side dish and fluid milk). For breakfasts, a minimum of 3 menu items is required (2 menu items and fluid milk).
- Please refer to Appendix A of this publication and to FNS-303, A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals for additional information.

#### **What are the general requirements for OVS in Nutrient Standard Menu Planning/Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning?**

- Students must take full servings (as determined by the menu planner) for the items to count toward a reimbursable meal. Students may take smaller portions of the declined items; however, the smaller portions do not count towards a reimbursable meal.
- The menu planner determines the number of menu items in a reimbursable meal based on the nutrient analysis. A variety of choices of entrées, side dishes and milk does not determine the number of items in a reimbursable meal or the minimum number of items for OVS.
- Students may be offered foods as individual items or as combinations.
- Double servings of the same menu item (such as 2 servings of the same side dish) may be credited as 1 menu item for both lunch and breakfast.

## What are the specific OVS requirements for lunch?

- Students must be offered the planned menu consisting of a minimum of 3 menu items (entrée, side dish, and fluid milk) in the serving sizes planned.
- Students must always take the entrée.
- Students must take at least 2 menu items and may never decline more than 2 menu items. One of the selected menu items must always be an entrée.
- Menu items, particularly entrées, are counted differently for OVS depending on how they are offered and selected. For example:
  - If a school offers “Hamburger on a Bun” as the entrée, this counts as one menu item. The student does not have the choice of taking the hamburger or bun separately.
  - If the school offers “Hamburger Patty” as the entrée and “Bun” as a side dish, this counts as 2 menu items. A student must take the hamburger, but may decline the bun.

## What are the specific OVS requirements for breakfast?

- Students must be offered the planned menu consisting of at least 3 menu items (fluid milk and at least 2 additional menu items) in the planned serving sizes.
- Students may decline no more than 1 of the 3 or more menu items offered.
- Students may decline any menu item, including the milk.



## Questions and Answers for Part III., Nutrient Standard Menu Planning and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning

### 1. How are serving sizes determined for OVS under Nutrient Standard Menu Planning/Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning?

Because there are no prescribed serving sizes for the nutrient standard menu planning approach, once the menu is planned based on the nutrient analysis, the **planned** serving sizes become the **required** serving sizes for a reimbursable meal and for OVS. If an amount smaller than the planned serving size is served, the menu item cannot count toward meeting the meal requirements under OVS. For the purposes of OVS, it is important that the menu planner communicate the planned servings sizes to all staff in order to ensure that the student receives a reimbursable meal.

### 2. Must the student select the entrée under OVS for lunch?

Yes; under nutrient standard menu planning/assisted nutrient standard menu planning, the student can never decline the entrée for a reimbursable lunch. If the student does not want to take the entrée, the meal cannot be claimed for reimbursement, and the student must be charged a la carte prices, regardless of the number of other menu items selected.

### 3. Are condiments considered menu items for the purposes of OVS?

No. Condiments are included in the nutrient analysis but are not considered menu items for the purposes of a reimbursable meal or OVS. In addition, a condiment is not considered part of a menu item. For example, an entrée consists of sliced roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy. If the student does not want the gravy, s/he is still considered to have taken the entrée.

### 4. For the NSLP, what is the maximum number of menu items the student may decline?

Number of Menu Items Planned	Entrée	Maximum Number of Menu Items to Decline
3	Must always take	1
4		2
5 or more		2

## 5. Consider this NSLP menu:

Entrées: Spaghetti with Marinara sauce, turkey sandwich OR chicken nuggets;

Side dishes (2 planned for the full reimbursable meal and student may select a maximum of 2): garlic bread, coleslaw, green peas, peaches, roll, green beans, oatmeal cookie;

Milk: low fat chocolate milk, low fat unflavored milk OR nonfat unflavored milk.

### **How many menu items are offered in this menu? What must the student select in order to have a reimbursable meal under OVS?**

There are 4 menu items planned for a reimbursable meal: an entrée, a choice of 2 side dishes and a choice of milk. At a minimum under OVS, the student must select an entrée and at least 1 other menu item—either a side dish or milk.

The menu planner determines the number of menu items in a reimbursable meal. A variety of **choices** of entrées, side dishes or choice of milk do not affect how a reimbursable meal is determined for OVS.

## 6. Consider this NSLP menu:

Entrées: Hamburger on a bun, cheese pizza OR chef's salad.

Side dishes (choose 3 for a full reimbursable meal): side salad, fruit cup, assorted fresh fruits, oven-baked potatoes, mixed vegetables, green beans, dinner roll, crudités with dip, oatmeal raisin cookie, or apple crisp.

Milk: low fat chocolate milk, low fat unflavored milk OR nonfat unflavored milk.

Assorted condiments.

### **How many menu items are offered in this menu? What must the student select in order to have a reimbursable meal under OVS?**

There are 5 menu items planned for a reimbursable meal: an entrée, a choice of 3 side dishes and a choice of milk. At a minimum under OVS, the student must select an entrée and at least plus 2 other menu items—either 2 side dishes or 1 side dish and milk.

**7. How can a menu planner help students make more nutritious choices among the side dishes offered?**

Side dishes may be divided into 2 or more groups to help target students' selections. For example, one group of side dishes could include fruits and vegetables while a second group could include grains and desserts. Consider this NSLP menu in which side dishes are grouped:

**Entrées:**

*Choose 1 of the following:*

- Hamburger on a bun
- Cheeseburger on a bun
- Pepperoni pizza
- Grilled chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy

**Side dishes:**

*Choose 2 of the following:*

- Garden salad with choice of dressing
- Steamed broccoli
- Mexican corn
- Oven baked potatoes
- Orange smiles
- Fresh strawberries with whipped topping

*Choose 1 of the following:*

- Garlic bread
- Whole-wheat dinner roll
- Whole-wheat sugar cookie

**Milk:**

*Choose of the following:*

- Low fat chocolate milk
- Low fat unflavored milk
- Fat free unflavored milk
- Whole unflavored milk

**How many items are offered in this menu? What must a student select in order to have a reimbursable meal under OVS?**

There are 5 menu items planned for a reimbursable meal (an entrée, 3 side dishes and milk). At a minimum under OVS, the student must select an entrée and at least 2 other menu items from any of the groups.



# Glossary

---

**Offer versus Serve or OVS:** a concept that applies to menu planning and to the determination of reimbursable school meals. OVS allows students to decline some of the **food** offered in a school lunch or school breakfast.

**Food-based menu planning:** the general term for the two menu planning approaches that follow a meal pattern. The two food-based menu planning approaches are the: Traditional Food-based Menu Planning Approach and Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning Approach.

**Food component:** 1 of the 4 food groups that comprise reimbursable meals planned under a food-based menu planning approach. The 4 food components are: meat/meat alternate, grains/breads, vegetables/fruits, and fluid milk.

**Food item:** For the NSLP, 1 of the 5 foods offered under a food-based menu planning approach: meat/meat alternate, grains/breads, 2 servings of vegetables/fruits, and fluid milk. For the SBP, 1 of 4 foods offered under a food-based menu planning approach: milk, juice/fruit/vegetable, and 2 servings from 1 of the following components, 1 serving from each component or an equivalent combination of both: grains/breads and/or meat/meat alternate.

**Nutrient analysis-based menu planning:** the general term for the two menu planning approaches that analyze the nutrients in meals over a school week to plan meals that meet age/grade appropriate nutrient standards. The two nutrient-analysis based menu planning approaches are the: Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Approach and Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Approach.

**Nutrient standards:** minimum levels of calories and other key nutrients that all school meals must meet.

**Menu item:** any single food or combination of foods under Nutrient Standard Menu Planning or Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning **except** a condiment.

**Entrée:** a combination of foods or a single food item offered as the main course.





